Northumbria Research Link

Introduction for Special Issue 'Autotheory in Contemporary Visual Arts Practice'

Katherine Baxter [1],[*] and **Cat Auburn** [2],[*]

1   Department of Humanities, Northumbria University, Newcastle-upon-Tyne NE1 8ST, UK
2   Department of Arts, Northumbria University, Newcastle-upon-Tyne NE1 8ST, UK
*   Correspondence: katherine.baxter@northumbria.ac.uk (K.B.); cat.auburn@northumbria.ac.uk (C.A.)

1. Introduction

The process of working with authors and artists to develop their articles has been rewarding, and has revealed the challenges of translating artistic practice, particularly autotheoretical artistic practice, into an academic format. First, there is the general difficulty of translating art practice (visual or otherwise) into language, assuming that it does not contain text and is not initially language-based. Second, there is a negotiation with the common academic expectation that alternative forms of knowledge production, such as artistic, practice-based research, be legitimized through the translation of this knowledge into a written, language-based format for conventional digestion. Third, specific ethical considerations emerge when translating an autotheoretical art practice into an academic format. Even the reference of this Special Issue's title to 'visual' practice has limitations; as editors we recognize that not all artistic practice is visual and may consist of other media, as seen in the radio-based practices of two of our contributors. Rather, we use the word 'visual' to establish a contrast with more literary forms of autotheory.

2. Theories of Autotheory

The contemporary visibility of the term *autotheory* starts with its mention by Maggie Nelson in *The Argonauts* (2015), though Nelson states that she borrowed the term from Paul B. Preciado's 2008 novel, *Testo Yonqui* (*Testo Junkie*).[1] In its simplest form, autotheory is defined as the joining of autobiography and theory, more often than not within a work of literature, art, or other creative output. Autotheoretical enquiries gain their insights through the distinct engagement of the autobiographical self with theory, and, furthermore, through embodied theorizing with an extended plural self.[2] This plural self is cultivated through experimental citation, speaking *with*, curating *with*, and other forms of creative, imaginative practices. There is thus an elasticity to autotheory; its boundaries stretch to encompass literary genres, critical discourse, creative practice, and academic methodology.

In her introduction to a Special Issue of the *Arizona Quarterly*, Robyn Wiegman situates autotheory within a valuable macro-view (albeit within a framework that assumes autotheory is solely a literary amalgamation of autobiography and theory). Wiegman positions autotheory as "a distinctly feminist practice, extending second wave feminism's commitment to putting 'flesh' on the universalist pretensions of established theoretical traditions by situating the story of lived experience in politically consequential terms" (Wiegman 2020, pp. 7–8).[3] She suggests that critical theory's ability to exercise its ideological remit—the reorientation of "the way the humanities understands the politics, ideologies, and epistemological priorities of the West's Enlightenment project"—is compromised. Autobiography's authority of "the self-knowing individual" (Wiegman 2020, p. 5) is deeply embedded within this conflict:

> Critics of critical theory have noted a distinct tendency toward an unacknowledged universalism that ensues from the emphasis on language as the home base of the

subject's fraught historical and social emergence and a dismissal of materialities that cannot be ascribed to a human frame, even if that frame is itself the key object of critical theory's anti-humanist concerns. Add to this the ongoing perception that even within the field of proper names the hierarchies and economic thefts that undergird the history of western "man" are simultaneously duplicated and disavowed and it becomes apparent that theory shares with autobiography a contentious reputation. It is both the referent for an intellectual tradition that explores and explodes the fantasies of authority and self-knowing that accompany the modern conception of the person and with it the violence and hypocrisy of the political order of western liberalism and something akin, in its canonical formation, to institutionalized business as usual. (Wiegman 2020, p. 5)

In defining autotheory's origins, scholarship has therefore sought to position it within a longer theoretical tradition—one that is not necessarily literary or American-centric.[4] Some proposed precursors to autotheory are as follows: Autofiction (Clare 2020); Freud's autobiographical development of psychoanalysis through dream interpretation (Laubender 2020; Clare 2020, p. 88); French feminism post-1970, particularly the feminist critique of autofiction (Lévesque-Jalbert 2020); the "retroactive re-appropriation" that citation facilitates between the work of Stein and Derrida (Tracy 2020, p. 32); and the "intersectional writing and performance art of many Black feminists and women of colour" (Zwartjes 2019). Other closely related or seemingly interchangeable terms for autotheory are critical memoir (Fournier 2018, p. 644); theoretical fiction (Hawkins 2006, p. 263); life-thinking (Samatar in Fournier 2018, p. 644); and fiction theory (Godard in Fournier 2018, p. 644).

As these terms suggest, literary examples of autotheory have predominated in discussions and definitions of this field to date. These examples have shaped a shared set of characteristics attributed to literary autotheory that include an expansion of autobiography and critical theory that exceeds the fusing of these genres by stretching and transforming them (Lévesque-Jalbert 2020, p. 65; Clare 2020, p. 90; Pearl 2018, p. 200); an experimental style (Laubender 2020, p. 54); unconventional citation (Wiegman 2018, p. 210); plural-authorship (Laubender 2020, p. 57); theoretical writing that opens itself to autobiographical aspects of the writer's life (Tracy 2020, p. 15); a differentiation from memoir (Nelson in Lévesque-Jalbert 2020, p. 65); "a feminist modality" (KC 2016); a postmodern undertaking aimed at resistance to the Modernist "essential self" that advocates instead for a socially constructed multiplicity of selves (Lévesque-Jalbert 2020, p. 79); an emphasis on embodied experience (Clare 2020, p. 90); an exploration of "expanding notions of the self via theory" in relation to the collective (Clare 2020, p. 90); an act of re-imagining a socially just self and society (Laubender 2020, p. 57); and "auto" used as "a corrective to 'theory'" (Jagose and Wallace 2020, pp. 109–10). Examples of autotheoretical texts discussed in this vein include Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts (2015)*, Paul B. Preciado's *Testo Junkie* (2008), Chris Kraus's *I Love Dick* (1996), and Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014).

Artist, curator, and academic, Lauren Fournier, presents another approach to autotheory via a substantial body of work.[5] In her 2018 essay "Sick Women, Sad Girls, and Selfie Theory: Autotheory as Contemporary Feminist Practice," Fournier situates autotheory distinctly within visual cultures and contemporary art (Fournier 2018). The aesthetic she describes is experimental, expansive, and intrinsically intertwined with social media and internet-based technologies (Fournier 2018, p. 645). She argues that autotheory is a performative post-1960s practice with a well-established feminist genealogy that "takes one's embodied experiences as a primary text or raw material through which to theorize, process, and reiterate theory to feminist effects" (Fournier 2018, pp. 644–45). In positioning autotheory in such a manner, Fournier suggests that "autotheory becomes a way of rereading earlier feminist texts" (Fournier 2018, p. 644).[6]

Fournier expands upon autotheory's feminist lineage in her manifesto-like 2021 publication, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism.* Here, she suggests that the aptness of autotheory in contemporary culture is concurrent with the sociopolitical impetus to decolonize traditional seats of power—museums, education and, importantly,

critical theory (Fournier 2021, p. 273). "[I]n broadening the archive of works and practices that are considered autotheoretical, [Fournier argues] they will also extend the broader actions towards decolon[i]alisation" (Fournier paraphrased in Lee 2021, p. 399). In this context, we find a broader range of autotheoretical texts, works, and artists discussed, including Clarice Lispector's *Agua Viva*, Adrian Piper's *Food for the Spirit*, Cauleen Smith's *Human_3.0 Reading List*, Carolyn Lazard's *In Sickness and Study*, Roxane Gay's *Bad Feminist*, Sara Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life*, Virginie Despentes's *King Kong Theory*, and Johanna Hedva's *Sick Woman Theory*. Many of these artists, theorists, and works are invoked by the contributors to this Special Issue.

The expansiveness of Fournier's purview in *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* has seemingly cemented autotheory as a still-evolving critical discourse and artistic practice, rather than as a solely literary genre. However, there have been criticisms levelled at her book. Fournier's adoption of an overtly scholarly discourse and jargon instead of a more intimate autotheoretical voice has been accused of undermining the decolonizing aspirations of her subject matter, as has the over-representation of white makers and thinkers within the book (McNamara 2021). Autotheory does not automatically provide the level playing field that Fournier assumes, because "not everyone's interiority is received with the same candour" (Markbreiter 2021).

These criticisms can be extended beyond Fournier, of course. As Monica Pearl suggests, autotheory "deconstructs the generic conventions of memoir and academic prose but remakes them as well." (Pearl cited in Wiegman 2018, p. 210) The tightrope that much autotheoretical scholarship walks, whether in textual or other creative forms, requires an endless, iterative negotiation between conceptual and embodied thinking to invoke and challenge the expectations of both. Indeed, what is rewarding about autotheory—namely the ability to speak back to institutional power from the strength of one's own identity and life experience—can create an ethical tension when working from within academic structures. On the one hand, autotheory often deploys content drawn from the domain of academia, such as critical theory, and scholarly tropes, such as (experimental) citation. On the other hand, those working autotheoretically may want to criticize and unravel some of the structures of academia, particularly those that have created inequalities and prejudices both inside and outside academic institutions. Autotheory is not a miracle pill that cuts through all inequalities. It may contribute towards holding systems of power accountable; however, while it still relies on the languages and cadences of that system, a Donna Haraway-ian kind of "staying with the trouble" is required, both to witness the risks in the first place and to hold fast while those risks play out.[7] Moreover, while autotheory can be, and is, produced outside of academic structures, many artistic (and indeed literary) works of autotheory are not visible through structures such as this academic journal due to the tensions and exclusions described.

It is easy to become distracted by a desire to lock down a definition of autotheory, yet rigidly defining it can reduce its potential as a practice. In its most potent forms, autotheory defies absolute definition because it is wielded specifically and richly within each individual art practice. As this Special Issue demonstrates, no two artists work with autotheory in the same way. Through visual arts practice, autotheory may move beyond the already-established tropes of "experimental citation" and "speaking with others" present in purely literary modes of autotheory. Fournier has laid important groundwork for autotheoretical artistic practice, since the majority of scholarship published before her 2021 monograph describes a type of literary autotheory.[8] We appreciate Fournier's intention to leave the definition of autotheory as a work-in-progress, inviting others to iteratively rework, interpret, addend, or even refute it. As Fournier states, "[m]ost simply, autotheory is the integration of the auto of 'self' with philosophy or theory, often in ways that are direct, performative, or self-aware—especially so in those practices that emerge with postmodernism" (Fournier 2021, p. 6).

3. Practices of Autotheory

To return to the issue of "doing" autotheory, at first glance, autotheory can appear an inviting mode of practice. It seems to encourage self-expression, location of the self within one's own work, and non-appropriative engagement with the ideas of others, whilst also engaging with feminist theoretical traditions to critique systems of power. Beyond these initial qualities, Cat, as a practitioner, has found that the practice of autotheory presents a variety of challenges.

If institutional power dynamics represent one challenge to working in an autotheoretical mode, the primacy of the individual, which the "auto" of "autotheory" signals, reflects another. Robyn Wiegman highlights the complication of truth-telling and authority-holding between the first-person voice of "auto-" and the third-person voice of "-theory" within autotheory (Wiegman 2020, pp. 2–5). There is an inclination to prioritize the testimony of the first person; equally, there is an authority leant to an argument through institutionally sanctioned knowledge, whether that is the omniscient voiceover featured in traditional documentary formats or the assumed authority of the third-person voice in textbooks.

There is a risk, then, of autotheory of being stuck or hiding behind the auto- (or indeed the theory) part of autotheory. The pull of the autobiographical voice can mask the construction of the piece itself and the multiple perspectives at play, most notably when folding in the voices of others through autotheoretical mechanisms such as experimental citation. The autobiographical voice can mask the ability for the mode to be strategically employed[9], particularly if there is a failure to recognize and address the gap that exists between the narrative self and the autobiographical self, which can be manipulated for performative effect.[10] Additional risks associated with the practice of autotheory include revealing sensitive autobiographic information, especially when this intersects with the biography of another (Fournier 2021, pp. 160–66) or a lack of awareness that authenticity is not necessarily implicit within the "auto-" of autotheory.

Risks also emerge in relation to the audiences and communities that autotheory seeks to engage or critique. For example, what are the implications of performing that which is also being critically engaged with, as those working with autotheory—an embodied practice—so often do?[11] It is also worth asking whether those working with autotheory are inviting readers and viewers to collaborate as "co-thinkers" or "co-experiencers", or whether autotheory is instead implemented as an extractive experience in which the audience is made complicit or even forced into bearing witness without consent.

Carolyn Laubender poses another, related challenge of working autotheoretically: the citation of others' ideas without considering the possible instrumentalization of these voices for the sake of the author/artist's own agenda (Laubender 2020, p. 59). Laubender analyses notions of a "split" or "plural self" in autotheory, as well as the ethics surrounding these issues. An interesting caution arises from this, namely that, "in its refusal of both conventional autobiographical and psychoanalytic styles of self-narration, autotheory enacts a wish for an ethico-political form of self-writing not bound up with the reproduction of neoliberal individualism's violences," yet enacting this wish without considering the ethics of plural authorship runs the risk of misappropriating the voice of the other (Laubender 2020, p. 49). Autotheory thus always risks co-opting the voice of the other, even as it purports to collaborate and "speak with" these voices; this risk is due to, amongst other factors, curatorial processes. As editors, we too run this risk in bringing together our group of contributors to this Special Issue.

Finally, it is important to consider how the act of theorizing actually occurs within artistic, practice-based autotheory.[12] This is difficult territory because this particular type of autotheory engages with alternative knowledge production through artistic actions (processes) and traces (artworks) that offer an expanded form of theorizing via individual embodied experiences, as produced by artistic practice. Immediately, the visibility and comprehensibility of this form of theorizing are reduced due to the difficulties of translating alternative forms of knowledge production into language-based versions for a more conventional, recognizable form of theorizing, particularly within academic circles. As others

in this Special Issue have noted, we are inevitably led back to using words—or using a lack of words/silence—to describe our engagement with theory. Either way, the relationship between theory and language is seemingly inescapable.

We offer the provocation that mechanisms of theorizing exist within the act of art practice itself—an embodied process through which theory, amongst other things, is simultaneously digested and generated. We suggest that autotheoretical artistic practice could, and perhaps, for those interested, should, seek to expand the remit of autotheoretical artistic practice beyond experimental citation (or the singular act of citing other theorists) to contribute to existing theory, or to generate entirely new theory. We include two examples in this Special Issue that articulate this desire: art writer, Caitlin Merrett King's article and an interview with artist, writer, and contemplative practitioner, Marilyn Freeman.

4. The Special Issue

The articles collected in this Special Issue explore autotheory in art practice from a variety of perspectives that illustrate autotheory's mobility, its affordances, and also some of its limitations. Our process of working with contributors has often involved online conversations alongside the standard formalities of the peer-review process. This shift into a more discursive and iterative mode than is commonly found in academic editing was a conscious choice, intended to re-embody the often-disembodied processes of academic publication practices.

Indeed, one common conversation we have engaged in throughout our work on this Special Issue has been how to negotiate the relationship between practice and theory in the context of an academic article. For instance, an early conversation with a potential contributor explored the ethical challenge of the academic article itself as a metonymy of the structures of power against which autotheory is often set. In the articles collected here, Antrianna Moutoula's contribution provides one model for negotiating this tension. Following her introduction, Moutoula provides an edited version of one of her "non-stop languaging" performances, in which thoughts and theory mix in real time in the process of recording sound and written words on the page. As she argues, however, the introduction and the main text should not be read as independent, "the main text as the auto- and the introduction as the -theory". Instead, we are invited to read them as a whole, and as part of Moutoula's larger autotheoretical practice (Moutoula 2022).

Grace Denton's article outlines an interestingly complementary practice to Moutoula's, not least in their shared use of radio broadcast formats. However, while Moutoula uses "non-stop languaging", Denton broadcasts silence. In both cases, the practice, in part, emerges from and speaks to those tensions of scholarly positioning, as well as the inherent power dynamics of such positioning noted above. Denton unpacks for us how broadcast silence can create intimacy and productive discomfort (Denton 2022).

Productive discomfort is a characteristic of Caitlin Merrett King's reflections on her development of "unsure theory." Merrett King's article also explores the tensions of academic and "non-academic" discourses, self-consciously code-switching at different moments in the article. This code-switching makes tangible the discomforts and discontinuities of academic style and theorization with the self. What emerges from this is Merett King's articulation of "unsure theory" through the challenges of using the vernacular of uncertainty and unsureness within an academic framework that demands a certainty of language (Merrett King 2022).

Sofie Gielis, Eleanor Duffin, and Ingel Vaikla also explore the question of how to speak. In "We Continue Each Other", they explore the affordances and limits of the first-person plural as a collaborative mode of autotheoretical practice. They ask whether it is "possible to speak as a WE and write subjectively in a way that does not become a generalisation or a compromise?" In doing so, they explore a "WE" that signals a collective identity that operates singularly within its grammatical plurality (Gielis et al. 2022).

The question of collaborative, communal, and plural approaches to autotheory also informs Wenwen Gu and Ke Su's examination of several trends in contemporary Chinese

art practice through the lens of autotheory. Gu and Su propose a reading of the transformations in Chinese art that occurred in the 1980s as manifestations of a process of collective self-reflection that parallels autotheoretical practices. They go on to demonstrate how more recent Chinese feminist art also provides a rich field for discussion of autotheory in contemporary visual arts (Gu and Su 2022).

Maria Gil Ulldemolins's contribution continues to explore the question of plurality through an extended reading of Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*. Putting herself in conversation with Velázquez's painting and Johanna Drucker's thinking in *Diagrammatic Writing*, Gil Ulldemolin considers the possibility of imagining the self plurally and in decentred ways through the spatialization of the *quodlibet*, a form of tromp l'oeil that represents a collection of objects. Gil Ulldemolin's discussion reflects on the potentialities of the *quodlibet* for the citational practices of autotheory (Gil Ulldemolins 2022).

As this introduction has gestured to at several junctures, the oscillation between non-linguistic and linguistic modes that the "auto", "theory" and "visual" elements of such practice entail generates a particular tension in thinking about autotheory in visual arts practice. Gabrielle Amodeo's contribution to this Special Issue unpacks this tension and places it in conversation with a similar tension between the speakable and the unspeakable in trauma theory. Amodeo reflects on her explorations of the limit points of the non-verbal in her own visual art practice and how language emerged for her as a necessary counter to the limits of the unspeakable (Amodeo 2022).

Cat's interview with Marilyn Freeman explores how the latter uses a similar tension, between sound and image, for example, in their practice of Cinema Divina to prompt meditative reflection. The interview entails considerations of Freeman's methodologies, the influences upon which they draw, and the relationship of Cinema Divina to autotheory in visual arts practice. Freeman's notion of "autotheory metabolizing the raw riches of autobiographic material mined directly from personal experience, fortifying that experience with somatic wisdom and liberating it from a capitalist patriarchy into original artifacts" provides a rich expression of what many of our other contributors also clearly value in the affordances of autotheory (Freeman and Auburn 2022).

This Special Issue seeks to create space for the provocations provided by our contributors and, in doing so, invites new readings of autotheoretical methods in art practice. Collected here, our contributors reflect on artistic practice and also critically examine the place of autotheory within practice. Importantly, many of our contributors seek to balance their first-person autotheoretical voice with the critical reflection asked of them by us as editors. We hope that this Special Issue provides new lenses through which we might examine autotheory in relation to visual art, what its limitations might be, and where there is potential for new insight and creativity.

Notes

[1] Fournier, Goh, Jagose and Lee, Laubender, Lévesque-Jalbert, Tracy, and Wiegman all attribute the visibility of autotheory to Nelson. Fournier (2018, p. 647) credits Stacey Young in her 1997 book, *Changing the Wor(l)d: Discourse, Politics, and the Feminist Movement* with coining the term. Fournier also has two pages dedicated to Young, likening her form of autotheory to autoethnography (Fournier 2021, pp. 22–26). Paul B. Preciado's, *Testo Junkie* was translated into English in 2013. Nelson revealed this as her source for the term in an interview (Nelson 2015).

[2] Plural-self is a term used in reference to autotheory by Carolyn Laubender. This is discussed further on in this introduction.

[3] Wiegman is the editor of *Arizona Quarterly*'s special edition on autotheory.

[4] Fournier (2018, 2021), Laubender (2020), Lévesque-Jalbert (2020), Tracy (2020) and Wiegman (2020) all suggest possible frameworks within which to position autotheory that are either outside of American culture or outside of literary examples.

[5] Fournier curated a video art exhibition called Autotheory in 2018 at Vtape in Toronto, in which she showed 12 different video artworks that she identified as being autotheoretical.

6   Fournier goes on to provide an excellent example of re-reading earlier feminist texts through the lens of autotheory in her 2021 book, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing and Criticism* with a breakdown of Adrian Piper's practice-led investigation (*Food for the Spirit, 1971*) into Kant's, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781).

7   The theory Donna J. Haraway's describes in her book, *Staying with Trouble*, (Haraway 2016) can be embodied by the titular phrase "staying with the trouble". Cat has developed this as a practice-based method of dealing with fear of transgression whilst working within ethically fraught territory, in collaboration with artist/architect Tynan Kyle Lewis.

8   Fournier's influence is notable in the fact that she is frequently the only autotheoretical scholar referenced in literature on the subject.

9   This train of thought was sparked by a passage in Special Issue contributor, Marilyn Freeman's book, *The Illuminated Space* (2020): "In media art, especially narrative forms, the confusability of the medium for what it represents makes it difficult to apprehend the medium itself . . . we are accustomed to the reality of what is represented . . . and so the fact of the representation's constructed ness is elided by our familiarity with what it represents." (Freeman 2020, p. 25)

10   See Kyle C. Frisina's "From Performativity to Performance: Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* and Autotheory" (Frisina 2020).

11   Laura Haynes posed this question in relation to her own research during the 'Biographical Fictioning' workshop, presented by the MLitt Art Writing department at the Glasgow School of Art in April 2022.

12   With gratitude from Cat to Special Issue contributor, Maria Gil Ulldemolins for many stimulating conversations about the nature and prioritisation of the act of theorising and contribution to theory within autotheory.

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